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**The View from Above: The Science of Social Space**

Jeanne Haffner. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2013. 208 pages, with 26 black & white illustrations. Hardcover £22.95, ISBN 9780262018791.

This book about the aerial image in twentieth-century French social science is not a conventional history of the parallel development of photography and aviation—and it is all the more engaging and thought-provoking as a result. Haffner has produced a hybrid work, combining elements of an intellectual history of French sociology with an urban history concerning mass housing in French cities. Woven through these narratives is the story of the production, interpretation and mobilisation of aerial photography in twentieth-century French discourses of urbanism involving social scientists, architects, planners and state agencies. The result is a genealogy of the concept of *l'espace social* or "social space" and the role of what Peter Galison terms (in a commendatory foreword) the "sight practices" (xi) relevant to its emergence.

In pursuit of this end, Haffner examines the careers and ideas of ethnographer Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe and the sociologist Henri Lefebvre, as well as many of their colleagues and contemporaries. Chapter 1 provides a succinct look at the refinement of techniques of aerial reconnaissance during the First World War, which encompassed training in the comparison and corroboration of images of the changing

battlefield, and in synthesising the “visible data” of aerial photographs with “invisible knowledge” of the enemy’s military strategy. Chapter 2 looks in detail at the migration during the 1920s and 1930s of these techniques of aerial imaging and interpretation into the disciplines of ethnography, human geography, history, architecture and planning. The visualisation of the earth from above was added to a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies for investigating human society, often by the same individuals who had been pilots, aviation specialists or reconnaissance interpreters during the First World War. (Those catalogued here include historian Marc Bloch, ethnographer Marcel Griaule and architect Marcel Lods). Aerial imagery, enabled by celebrated aeroplane in league with the camera, was held to offer a new and objective perspective. Combined with the social and political concerns precipitated by the Great Depression, Haffner argues, this adoption of aerial photography as a valuable research tool would develop over the following decades into “a spatially oriented critique of capitalism and modernity” (22) encapsulated in the intellectual category of “social space.”

After tracing the creation of expertise and experts in the field of interpreting aerial images, the action moves to the Second World War and the challenge of reconstruction when these expertise were brought to bear on the question of urban redevelopment and housing. Chapter 3 argues that the overview offered by the aerial image encouraged a level of abstraction that led to the construal of urban problems as spatial problems and the conception of urban solutions as spatial solutions. The aerial view of the industrialised city, in other words, helped promote the case for decentralisation. Proposed during the Vichy regime and pursued after 1944, this economic and urban restructuring entailed planning at a regional (rather than a local)

level, as well as the large scale creation of new workers' housing. Chapter 4 explores the continuity of individual careers and pertinent ideas from the interwar and wartime debates to the postwar moment. It also considers how the idea of "social space" first found explicit articulation and become integral to state-sponsored urban planning in the 1950s. The expertise of social scientists were drafted in to address the postwar housing crisis and, combining aerial visualisation and ethnographic fieldwork, figures like Chombart de Lauwe offered "social space" as *the* model for understanding spatial, economic and political issues in a given urban environment.

In contrast, chapter 5 charts a radical change in attitude by academics and practitioners to the aerial view in the 1960s—a change articulated with a rebuke of state-sponsored solutions to the housing crisis as typified by the creation of *les grands ensembles* (housing schemes) in the French city suburbs. At this time, Haffner suggests, the notion of distance became deeply problematic for many urban commentators. Decentralisation was viewed as a dehumanising process, facilitated by the detached aerial view and placing individuals at a distance from humane and historic urban centres and from each other. Thus reconfigured in the work of Lefebvre and others, "social space" remained a central concept in the debate, but the view from above underwent a reversal in its fortunes. Rather than a tool for creating better cities, it was viewed as an expression of state power and its dehumanising practices. The aerial view and planning at a regional level (*l'aménagement du territoire*) were deemed indicative of the state's dissociation from the everyday life and experience of its subjects.

Haffner narrates this story of how the concept of “social space” was developed, adopted and adapted with a brisk and clear prose. There are a few typographical errors and examples of repetitive phraseology which should have been picked up during the copy editing process, but this does not detract from the author’s accomplishment in examining “how a novel method of data collection gave rise to a new discourse about urban space” (7). The book’s concision is to be welcomed, but it does mean that a number of potential avenues of investigation are left off the itinerary. Haffner’s focus on France is both justified and productive. From the Montgolfier brothers and Daguerre, to Nadar’s aerial photographs of the outskirts of Paris in 1858, French innovators were vital to realising the long-held ambition of capturing the aerial view. Haffner also argues convincingly for French pre-eminence in aerial photography following the reconnaissance of trench warfare during the First World War and validates a focus on twentieth-century French discourse on urban space, citing its privileged position in cultural theory. Yet, notwithstanding this defensible focus and its intellectual rewards, readers might reasonably ask how this national story articulates with other elements of the cultural history of the aerial view. Haffner shows how global comparisons were interesting to the French, whether applying ethnographic practices first adopted in the colonies by French social scientists within *l’Hexagone* (as in the case of Chombart) or critiquing town planners’ “internal colonization” in *les banlieues* or suburbs (on the part of Lefebvre). But *The View from Above* does not examine how urban initiatives or uses of the aerial view in other countries impacted on those in France. Hopefully, such comparative will be picked up in the growing literature on aerial photography.

The author gives a detailed, albeit succinct account, of the development of housing solutions for the postwar period, touching on various state agencies and highlighting the role played by key figures. In doing so, Haffner builds on work concerning French urbanism by academics like Rémi Baudouï, Annie Fourcaut, Danièle Voldman and Rosemary Wakeman. Haffner's contribution is to further integrate the technologies of visualisation and the techniques of visual interpretation into this research agenda. Crucial to the success off Haffner's study is the tracing of different appropriations of the aerial view in the hands of these individuals and the offices of these institutions. The detailed architectural and planning history is thus a necessary vehicle to investigate the instrumental, symbolic and metaphorical importance of aerial photography in mid-twentieth-century France. Nonetheless, at points the intellectual or urban history overtakes discussion of the visual material. In my view, the argument would have been strengthened by more detailed discussion of the imagery. For instance, what was the connection between or interaction of the aerial image with other forms of photographic visualisation (e.g. architectural photography in the professional and popular press, or the photography of slums promoting social reform)? And how was this wider visual culture relevant to discussions and decisions about urbanism in the period? Haffner explores intriguing oddities, like the maquettoscope developed to provide street-level photographs of architectural models. One particularly striking metaphor which highlights how questions of vision penetrated urban debate is that of illness. Parallels were repeatedly drawn between the national body and the "health" (or otherwise) exhibited by urban spaces. The "natural" and "organic" spaces of rural villages were contrasted with "artificial" and "diseased" cities, while frequent comparison was made between the aerial overview enabled by the airborne camera for architects and planners, and the manner in which the microscope

enabled a comparable view of disease and infection for the biologist. More such examples, along with greater reflection on the manner in which aerial photography can encourage its audiences to view their environment, would have added insight regarding Lefebvre's assertion that urban space had been reduced to its image. Without such reflection, photographs illustrating Haffner's text sometimes appear like an aeroplane's black box; we are aware of their function, but their workings remain mysterious.

Notwithstanding this, Haffner convincingly argues that the concept of *l'espace social* owes its existence to the imagery made possible by the airborne camera, in conjunction with the development of expertise during the First World War and the architectural and planning opportunities that proceeded the second. Lefebvre's work is currently central to the methodologies of cultural studies and the study of everyday life. This research agenda informs much theoretical reflection on photography and its histories. Haffner's genealogy of "social space" is valuable to historians of photography for this reason alone. Given the centrality of aerial imagery and its interpretation to the intellectual milieu from which this key concept emerged, the book is doubly important. Working against the grain of canonising thinkers like Lefebvre, Haffner instead historicises the network of ideas in which the concept of "social space" found expression. The result is a book that not only offers a novel examination of a particular mode of image-making in a charged cultural moment, but also encourages a self-reflexive approach to methodologies and concepts currently in vogue.